

John O’Neal, 78, Champion of Theater in the Deep South, Dies

Gilbert Moses, left, and John O’Neal, two of the three founders of the Free Southern Theater, in 1965. Their troupe brought theater to black audiences in the South during the civil rights era. Associated Press

By Neil Genzlinger

Feb. 28, 2019



John O’Neal, who co-founded a groundbreaking troupe that brought theater to black audiences in the South during the civil rights era, and who encouraged people to tell their own stories as well as listen to his, died on Feb. 14 at his home in New Orleans. He was 78.

His daughter, Wendi Moore-O’Neal, said the cause was vascular disease.

Mr. O’Neal was still in his early 20s in 1963 when he, [Doris Derby](#) and [Gilbert Moses](#) founded the [Free Southern Theater](#), which presented free productions throughout the South. The troupe often performed in small towns to largely black audiences with little access to the theater.

Some of its productions emphasized black themes and characters; in one of the troupe’s first shows, Ossie Davis’s “Purlie Victorious,” about a black preacher, Mr. O’Neal played the title character. But the company also performed works like “Waiting for Godot.”

The idea, Mr. O’Neal explained in a 1964 interview with The New York Times, wasn’t merely to expose black audiences to theater; it was also to get them thinking about their own stories.

“We want to strengthen communication among Southern blacks and to assert that self-knowledge and creativity are the foundations of human dignity,” he said. “In the South it has been very hard for a Negro to look at and see anything but a distorted view of himself.”

To that end he encouraged audience discussion after the shows, a practice he refined over the years.

“He noticed when they would do the talkbacks that people would just kind of argue for their position,” his daughter said. “That meant that the people who talked the loudest and the longest would dominate the discussion. So he started timing people so that the time could be shared equally. And he started noticing that if people shared stories instead of making their argument, you wouldn’t get stuck in the conflict; you could actually hear the connections.”

These story circles, as he called them, became a trademark technique of his, both during the life of the Free Southern Theater, which disbanded in 1980, and with Junebug Productions, the successor arts organization he founded.

“Him doing theater and taking the makeup off and going out the back door was not his style,” Carol Bebelles, executive director of the [Ashé Cultural Arts Center](#) in New Orleans, who knew and worked with Mr. O’Neal for years, said in a telephone interview. “He really saw the audience as being the other part of the theatrical performance. It was: ‘We brought something for you. Do you have something to give to us?’ ”

Mr. O’Neal would draw inspiration from those story circles to create new work. As he put it, “You find the best stuff when you’re not looking for it.”

Mr. O’Neal, left, and Mr. Moses performing Martin Duberman’s play “In White America” in 1964. The Free Southern Theater often performed in small towns to largely black audiences. University of Southern Mississippi

John Milton O’Neal Jr. was born on Sept. 25, 1940, in Mound City, Ill. His father was a teacher, as was his mother, Rosetta (Crenshaw) O’Neal.

In 1962 he received a bachelor’s degree in philosophy and English at Southern Illinois University. His daughter said that at the same time he was a student at the university, his father was obtaining a master’s degree there.

After Mr. O’Neal’s graduation his interest in civil rights issues took him to the South, where he became an organizer for the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](#) in Georgia and Mississippi. He, Mr. Moses (who died in 1995) and Ms. Derby started the Free Southern Theater in Jackson, Miss., after hatching the idea over dinner.

“We were sitting at a table, the room was blue with smoke,” Mr. O’Neal recalled in a short documentary film (he and Mr. Moses were smokers), “and Doris said: ‘Well, if theater means anything anywhere, it should certainly mean something here. Why don’t we start a theater?’ ”

Their original base of operation was Tougaloo College near Jackson, though the troupe soon moved to New Orleans. It started on a shoestring.

“On tour,” The Times wrote in 1964, “the company will travel in a used station wagon and a used pickup truck. The station wagon was a gift; the group is seeking someone to pay for the truck.”

Mr. O’Neal liked to collaborate with other writers and theater groups to create multicultural works, as he did on [“Promise of a Love Song.”](#) which interwove three love stories from different cultures and was a joint effort by Junebug, Roadside Theater of Appalachia and Pregones Theater, a Puerto Rican company based in the Bronx.

He was perhaps best known for a character he created and performed in a series of one-man plays: Junebug Jabbo Jones, a mythical sort of griot who, speaking in southwestern Mississippi dialect, told homespun stories full of humor and universal wisdom. He introduced the character in 1980 in “Don’t Start Me Talkin’ or I’ll Tell Everything I Know: Sayings From the Life and Writings of Junebug Jabbo Jones,” and he performed the Junebug plays all over the country, including several times in New York.

“I am a storyteller,” Junebug says in one incarnation. “Storyteller. I say ‘storyteller’ instead of ‘liar’ because there’s a heap of difference between a storyteller and a liar. A liar, that’s somebody who will take and cover things over, mainly for his own private benefit. But your storyteller, now, that’s somebody who’ll take and uncover things, so everybody can get some good out of it.”

Mr. O’Neal’s first marriage, to Mary Felice Lovelace, ended in divorce, as did his second, to Marilyn Norton. In addition to his daughter, a child of his second marriage, he is survived by his wife, Bertha McNealy O’Neal; a son from his second marriage, William; a brother, Wendell; a sister, Pamela O’Neal Moody; a stepson, Arnold Regas; seven grandchildren; and a great-grandchild.

In the documentary, Mr. O’Neal recalled telling his father early on that he intended to be a playwright. His father, he said, expressed skepticism that he could make a living that way.

“I said, ‘I don’t intend to work for a living,’ ” he recalled. “ ‘I intend to live for my work.’ ”



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